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Ben Selwyn, *Workers, State and Development in Brazil: Powers of Labour, Chains of Value*.

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Recuperating Commodity Studies for a Marxist Political Economy: Possibilities and Limitations

Ben Selwyn's *Workers, State and Development in Brazil* makes a valuable contribution to a growing number of materialist critiques of commodity studies, and specifically, the global commodity chains (GCC) framework. Marxist scholars have noted the tendency in commodity studies to reduce the analysis of capitalism to that of the firm and inter-firm relations, eliding questions of class, gender, agrarian social relations, relations of production, and the position of nation-states and regions in global trade. Given the proliferation of such critiques, I want to take the opportunity of this review to pose the following question: can Marxist scholars recuperate the commodity chains framework for a materialist political economy? And are there any costs to doing so?

I have asked a variation of this question before in the context of a special issue and paper co-edited and co-authored with Jennifer Bair on *disarticulations* of commodity chains, inspired by feminist political economy and recent Marxist scholarship on primitive accumulation and accumulation by dispossession (Bair and Werner 2011). We have proposed an analysis of commodity chains as expressions of and contributors to uneven geographies of capitalism through the iterative incorporation and expulsion of firms, workers and regions into and from these global circuits. Related interventions in the literature stem from a concern for the firm-centrism of GCC, especially as the GCC framework has taken on dyadic notions of governance under the rubric of global value chains (see Bair 2005), and an impoverished notion of development *qua* firm upgrading (Bair and Dussel Peters 2006; Werner 2012). Other materialist critiques share similar apprehensions. Marcus Taylor has critiqued GCC for what he calls a "network essentialism", wherein the dynamics of commodity chains are attributed to the

functional characteristics of relations between firms, marginalizing the analysis of “the specific social relations through which local and national labor forces are produced, reproduced and deployed to create value within the production process”(2007: 534-535). Henry Bernstein, Selwyn’s doctoral adviser, has written a trenchant review of commodity studies in a similar vein together with Ian Campling (2006). And in several illuminating journal articles, Selwyn himself has detailed the techno-managerialist bent to the mainstream literature’s conception of industrial development, and its failure to address relations of production (see, for example, Selwyn 2012).

Workers, State and Development draws and expands upon this previously published work. The book grounds an empirically rich case study of table grape production in the São Francisco Valley (SFV) within regional and national class relations and, in particular, the role that organized labor played in shaping the outcomes of export accumulation and regional development. Instead of placing the bulk of explanatory weight on the set of inter-firm relationships that link this fertile valley in the country’s northeast with powerful retailers in the United Kingdom, Selwyn argues that this chain cannot be understood without proper attention to the determining role of national and regional class relations in Brazil’s impoverished northeast, and the actions taken by the state both to create irrigated agriculture and to forge hegemony through rural trade unions. As he repeats throughout the text, the developmental outcome of any kind of linking of places of production to external markets is co-determined by three factors: commodity specialism (as understood via Schumpeterian assumptions of entrepreneurial rent adopted by GCC and world-systems theory), the balance of class forces (drawing upon Robert Brenner, as well as E.O. Wright and Beverly Silver), and the role of the state as the manager of class relations. Rather than abandoning the framework of global commodity chains, then, Selwyn seeks to resuscitate GCC for materialist political economy by thinking dialectically about the role played by lead firms - in this case Northern supermarket chains - in structuring production relations in the global South. Selwyn argues that GCC “if carefully adapted and integrated into a dialectical conception of capitalism...is well placed to investigate real processes of contemporary uneven and combined development” (p. 23). I will return to this claim, Selwyn’s three mediating factors, and the overarching question of what is at stake in the materialist recuperation of commodity studies following a brief review of the book’s contents.

Chapter 2 offers a detailed description of the export horticulture industry in the valley. The extensive irrigated fields are the product of a state modernization project that initially aimed

to settle *colonos*, or small-scale farmers, who were displaced by a large dam project onto productive land where they could produce foodstuffs for the growing urban masses. Without substantive land reform, both the client farmers and the target market of the region's state-sponsored irrigation projects shifted. By the 1990s, state resources - including extension services, credit, and research and development - were squarely focused on medium and large farms producing fruits and vegetables for export. The shift to fruiticulture, and away from locally consumed and traditional cash crops, is well documented (see, for example, Table 2.5). Despite the growth of horticulture, however, sugar remained king in the region and Selwyn gives this fact some attention in the following chapter. Grape production in the 1990s suffered from fits and starts, strongly determined by the value of the Brazilian Real, suggesting a 'low-value' commodity that competed on the basis of razor thin price differentials. Following this lackluster beginning, the boom in grape production in the first decade of the 2000s was nothing short of astronomical: the number of cultivated hectares tripled in only five years, and the number of workers reached nearly 50,000. A key point in Selwyn's analysis is the increasing dependence of the export grape sector on labor-intensive production even as firms moved up the proverbial value chain. Unlike the garment industry where firms generally seek to rationalize labor as they develop more complex production methods in their efforts to access higher value niches of the chain, grape production appears to become even more labor intensive as firms require not only more workers in absolute terms, but also more workers skilled in specific operations, in order to meet the speed and quality demands of the supermarket chains that occupy the upper echelons of the grape trade. Moreover, the SFV has the advantage of year-round production. The two harvests per year are conducive to permanent, rather than seasonal and/or temporary, work contracts, thus creating a large and relatively stable workforce that can potentially form a solid rank and file.

The possibility to transform such a class-in-itself into a class-for-itself is, however, not pre-determined by the competitive requirements of the labor process. And here is where the reader gets to the heart of Selwyn's case and the strength of his analysis. In the subsequent four chapters (3 through 6), Selwyn presents in rich detail the process by which a corporatist union - *el Sindicato dos Trabalhadores Rurais* (STR) - became a true vehicle for the advancement of rural workers' interests, one that successfully turned the structural power of grape workers into associational power. In telling the story of the STR, Selwyn carefully situates the organization

and its activities in the context of the national labor movement and its particular regional dynamics. In the wake of widespread dispossession among the country's rural inhabitants in the second half of the twentieth century, the countryside saw an increase in the number of farmworkers, and a subsequent surge in the number and size of rural trade unions. Under dictatorship, the state coopted these organizations, incorporating them into a scheme of minimal welfare provision administered by a passive union bureaucracy. The status quo was breached in the 1970s as a more combative unionism was born in the industrial heartlands - and accompanying misery - in and around São Paulo, as well as in the sugar fields of the SFV. The winds of contestation would not reach the horticulture sector until the 1990s when the STR shifted its approach from assisting *colonos* in accessing land to aggressively organizing grape workers around demands for higher wages and better working conditions. Militants from the region's sugar federation, who had successfully organized under dictatorship in the 1970s in part through the tactic of strategic strikes, trained STR organizers. By the late 1990s, the union carried out several strikes that led to the achievement of significant improvements and the signing of a collective bargaining agreement. Given the sheer size of the 'reserve army' in the valley - an estimated 89 percent of the economically active rural population was not formally employed - this outcome is a true testament to the importance of national conjunctural conditions, regional class dynamics, as well as forms of incorporation into global markets.

In chapters 4 and 5, Selwyn elaborates on the position of women in the grape sector and in the union. Like their counterparts in many low-wage industries, women are hired for their apparent docility and dexterity, and their skills are debased, as Jane Jenson (1989) once so pithily wrote, as natural talents in contradistinction to those skills acquired via training and valued in wage terms. While STR appeared to be somewhat reluctant to adopt a women's platform, pressure from regional and national confederations and the sheer weight of women's participation in the sector led to a proactive agenda on women's issues, and the subsequent participation of women workers at all levels of the union's leadership. The real strength of Selwyn's attention to the gender division of labor lies in his analysis of its transformation in line with the sector's restructuring in the 2000s in chapter 5. In this fifth chapter, and the following one, Selwyn analyzes how the gains initially made by the STR were challenged directly by employers and indirectly by the country's shifting political economic context, especially the election of Lula and the triumph of the Worker's Party, the PT. With respect to employer

strategies in relation to female workers, farms hired fewer women as the non-wage costs of female employment (maternity leave, hours for lactation, *etc.*) were pushed up via the collective bargaining agreement. While overall numbers of women workers continued to increase in the late 2000s, their relative weight in the sector diminished, and the STR considered demands for gender quotas to counter this defeminization trend. In addition, large farms instituted forms of paternalist and strategic labor control in an attempt to undermine the strength of the union, including the provision of low-cost, decent quality housing, the introduction of modern human resources management, and the recruitment of workers from the dry, non-irrigated interior (the Sertão).

In the final empirical chapter (chapter 6), Selwyn demonstrates the local effects of national political change. The depredations of neoliberalism decimated the union movement in the country's industrial heartland in the 1990s and led to the rise of a union leadership willing to accommodate capital while also creating the conditions for the PT to be elected. Hundreds of union officials were subsequently incorporated into the apparatus of the state, while the PT adopted a form of 'Third Way' social democracy. Selwyn is careful not to presume that the class relations in the SFV immediately shifted in accordance with the national conjuncture. In effect, while the new kinds of class compromise that he found between STR and grape farms appear to reflect the national trend, in fact these were just as much a product of global processes. As grape farms faced increasing demands for international certification based on quality and working conditions, compliant farms grew to appreciate the 'whistle-blowing' function of the STR, effectively resolving their problem of 'free rider' farms that were receiving the benefits of the valley's positive international reputation without shouldering the costs of certification. Overall, although the period of the study is relatively short, Selwyn is able to trace on-going shifts in relations between labor and agro-export capital, and demonstrate that these are part of a dialectical process that constantly renovates relations of production and class relations broadly in the valley. It is precisely this kind of in-depth, empirically rich as well as theoretically grounded work that is needed in commodity studies.

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Let me return now to the question of the possibilities and limitations of a materialist recuperation of GCC in relation to the content and approach of the book in particular. Here, I would like to make three points, cognizant of the limitations of any study that takes on the absolutely necessary challenge of tacking between the abstract and the general, on the one hand, and actually existing relations of production, on the other. First, while Selwyn attempts to rescue GCC from its failure to deal with class relations and the role of the state by adding these two elements to the framework, the conceptualization of the state, in particular, is wanting. It would be disingenuous of any reviewer to demand a developed theory of the state in such a work. But the text, including its title, does promise a substantive discussion which, I feel, is never fulfilled. Unlike the other two mediating factors in his theoretical framework (*i.e.* commodity specialism and the balance of class forces), the foundations of Selwyn's approach to the state are unclear. Clearly, the state is not adequately theorized as a "guarantor of capital accumulation" (p. 23) since this would presume a functionalist relationship between the form of capitalism and the form of the state. Although Selwyn acknowledges this not to be the case theoretically, and his rich empirical account demonstrates the contingency between political and economic formations, the tension between the state's role as a political structure and its function in capitalist accumulation is not adequately considered. The monograph would have benefited from a more sustained discussion of this tension between the state as, at once, both a manager of capitalist development, and the expression of competing political blocs allied to different fractions of capital and varying forms of accumulation. The parallels here are not with the United States, Germany and Japan (as in Barrington Moore's work discussed on page 30), but with Italy (Gramsci), southern Europe more broadly (Poulantzas), South Africa (for example Hart 2002) and the Southern cone (see below).

Second, and inseparable from the first point, the book does not engage Brazilian, or wider Latin American, political economy. The theoretical framework, which discusses the Brenner debates, world-systems theory, and British class analysis, could have been greatly enriched by engaging with the basics of class/state theories offered by Brazilian political economists, including Fernando Henrique Cardoso's and Celso Furtado's distinct contributions to structuralism, as well as their Marxist critics. Both these intellectuals appear briefly in the text in their respective roles as neoliberal president in the 1990s (Cardoso) and the head of the northeast development project in the 1960s (Furtado). But these towering figures were also powerful

intellectuals and even ideologues of the form of the Brazilian state and its relationship to capital accumulation, global markets, and relations of production. From what I can tell, not a single Brazilian scholar is cited in the introduction and theoretical chapter (chapter 1). It makes little sense for a Marxist analysis of Brazilian development not to engage with the country's important, widely read Marxist scholars (some even translated into English), such as Theotônio dos Santos (see, for example, 1998). My point is not that Brazilian political economy is under-represented in the text, but rather that the poverty of the book's theoretical discussion of the Brazilian state could have been remedied by serious engagement with its structuralist, *dependentista* and reformist schools of political economic thought.

Third and finally, the narrow focus on GCC and its limitations leads to a restrictive discussion of development. Selwyn adds a clear and concise voice to a number of Marxist scholars who have critiqued Schumpeterian conceptions of value as a form of entrepreneurial rent. The understanding of value in Schumpeterian terms locates techno-managerial interventions as the source of higher relative returns, and practically erases an analysis of the way in which the creation and distribution of these returns conditions and is conditioned by relations of production and reproduction. As opposed to an orthodox Marxist revision of this problematic (see Starosta 2010), Selwyn argues that materialist scholars recuperate GCC by considering entrepreneurial returns in dialectical tension with the labor regime, class relations, and ultimately the conditions of extraction of surplus value. Here, I agree with Selwyn (see Werner 2012). As far as analyses of GCC is concerned, labor cannot be thought of solely as an input; labor must be considered as an active agent whose individual and collective strategies condition the possibilities of surplus value extraction via struggles over wage and non-wage conditions. What troubles me is the presumption that such an analysis is sufficient for a discussion of regional development. In the specific case at hand, while the STR is no doubt a developmental force in the region, its collective bargaining agreement is no guarantee of regional development. One would need a better understanding of relations of production in other economic sectors of the SFV, and the positioning of the northeast region in relation to other regions of the country, to make claims with respect to development. To what extent does capital accumulation in the northeast translate into shifts in relations of inter-regional subordination and domination within Brazil, for example? Finally, Selwyn gives short shrift to development as a concept, equating it with Amartya Sen's notion of development as freedom associated with rising

levels of individual and collective prosperity. More discussion is necessary here and Selwyn no doubt is aware of the limitations. After all, collective bargaining can lead to greater political and economic power for a union's membership, but in a place that continues to be defined by high levels of 'surplus population', to what extent do the gains made by the union translate into broader development outcomes for the inhabitants of the region?

The three deficiencies of this otherwise engaging and thorough text can be attributed to the latter's narrow theoretical framing as an intervention into the GCC literature. One effect of this framing is that the theoretical debates are grounded in the experiences of, and written by theorists largely located in, the global North, while the empirical case unfolds in the South. We need to move beyond such a global epistemological division of labor. Unfortunately, I am not sure that the well-worn academic GCC debates will be helpful at this point. While GCC may be an advance with respect to its world-systems parentage in terms of offering a less structuralist (and structural-functionalist) reading of economic positioning in the global economy, WST is certainly more advanced in its sustained engagements with Third World Marxist theorists (even if the latter's ideas, selectively translated into English, led to narrow and crude readings of the *dependentistas* in the global North - see Slater 2004). In short, I think the cost of taking a revisionist GCC as the starting point of materialist political economic analysis is relatively high. My point is certainly not that Marxists disengage from the important questions that have been raised by the sociological variant of GCC - firm governance, distribution of returns, learning and technology transfer, *etc.* Rather, critical scholars must take care not to reduce political economy to commodity-focused studies. While Selwyn's monograph - its sustained and well-developed case study, together with its theoretical grounding - makes a good attempt to position a commodity study within a broader political economic analysis, the text is ultimately too constrained by the object of its critique.

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